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ABSTRACT

This report explores some key problems and issues in the teaching of a course--Identification of User Information Needs--to information professionals. Tentative practical recommendations are offered, largely as they pertain to developing countries, and the following considerations are discussed: (1) manpower needs for information professionals are mainly determined by social development requirements and national priorities; (2) the broad aim of curricula for information professionals should be to produce personnel with socially relevant competencies; (3) the low status of this topic is fading, and curricula should reflect this emerging reality; (4) the identification of user needs is important; and (5) there is adequate content to make up a full course on this topic. An outline for the course is proposed, and 28 additional readings are listed. (7 references) (CGD)

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USER STUDIES: HOW TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL AND ACTUAL USER NEEDS.

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USER STUDIES: HOW TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL AND ACTUAL USER NEEDS

I. I Introduction

This is a discusion paper whose objective is to explore some key problems and issues in the teaching of Identification of User Information Needs to Information professionals. This exploration is carried out not only within the context of harmonization of education and training of all Information Professionals but also the level of social development as the main determinant of manpower training needs.

Some tentative practical recommendations are then offered based on the situation analysis - largely as it pertains to Developing Countries. The suggestions are offered purely to serve as an illustration of one possible way of translating the issues, problems, possibilities, and challenges to a practical teaching programme rather than serve as a universalistic prescription to suit all situations.

I.2 Socially Relevant Competencies:

The needs for Information manpower in a country, for which the curricula is the main implementation instrument, in my view, are determined by the social development requirements of a particular

society, at a particular historical time in its social, political, economic, industrial and technological development.

Neelameghan (1979) suggests that there is an inbuilt element of instability even in prioritizing development and determining indicators, because the priorities of development differ from one society to the next, and the priorities may differ within the same country at different periods. Such priorities may also differ between one social group and the next, whithin the same country, within the same time frame.

It seems, therefore, that while a scenario of rapid change is clearly visible within all social groups - in culture, economics, technological innovations & adaptations - to determine what training and education is relevant to the needs of a particular society (and sub-societies) at a particular time in its development is a much more complex and difficult proposition. In the context of an underdeveloped society, what was socially irrelevant in 1965 might have become socially relevant by 1975; and possibly no longer relevant by 1987.

It is my hope that we can agree that in the planning and excuting a curricula for Information Professionals the broad aim should be the production of information personnel with <u>socially relevant competencies</u> who can make a contribution to social economic development through their information management skills.

Personnaly, I view a curricula in functional and utilitarian terms, and the success of any information manpower training programme is best assessed from the end - results in terms of the impact of the Information personnel in accelerating the pace of innovation in the country, increasing the utilization of information to achieve excellence in: education, Management of Institutions, Research and Development, Economic development, Industrial development, wiping out illiteracy, etc. In short, this is a group of professionals who should carry out the effective menitoring of the creation, flow, use, and results of use of information by all stratas in society as well as operating specific information providing institutions.

I.3 Present Statues of User Information Needs in Curricula:

To what extent does User Information Needs feature as a distinct part of the curricula in the different types of Education and Training programmes for Information Professionals, Armed with this question I scanned as number of curricular belonging to Library, Archival, and Information Science Schools, Unesco (1972). My impressions, which I can in no way offer as hard evidence, because of the lack of both specific details of what is being taught and up to date information on the curricula of schools other than my own, is that in the majority of cases user needs is not regarded as a full subject in its own right with the same status as for example, the traditional subject areas of Reference Work, Library administration, Cataloguing, Classification, Indexing,

Archival administration, etc. However although my conclusion is that User Needs as a subject has low status in most of the curricula observed, it did appear to me that User Information needs as a concept permeates to a very considerable albeit lopsided extent a major part of the content of the curricular. In this sense, the subject of User Information Needs appears to be regarded as a background factor to what is being taught in the schools, rather that a central concern of the curricular.
In the instances where User Information Needs was specifically mentioned a number of tendencies were noticeable: one such tendency is to deal with the problems of a specific group of users in the utilization of Information Services, e.g. children and Young people, students, Industrialists etc. It is more than unplied that the problem lies with the Users rather than with the way the Information system operates.

A second tendency was to handle User information needs as a means of achieving a more important end-result-reading interests and bookselection, reader instruction and Library use etc.
A third alternative was to treat user needs as synonymous with Reader Services.

In looking at the handling of the subject Identification of User Information needs by East European Schools and to some extent Scandinavian Schools they tended to see the Users as a

subject Worthy of study in its own right with topics like psychology of the User, Sociology and Information Uses, Reader guidance, frequently appearing in the curricula.

I.4 Information System Operation Parameters:

In order to visualize clearly how the subject under discussion may feature in the curricula and its weighting it is helpful to 'see' such a curricula in its totality. Keren (1975) has identified three Information System Operation parameters, to which I will top up with two to make a total of five which are basic requisite knowledge areas for the successful operation of Information systems.

1. Information Users
2. Analysis and the Organisation of the Information contents
3. Supply and delivery of Information Services and Products
4. Sources of Information
5. Planning and Management of Information Institutions.

I take these broad parameters as representing knowledge and skill areas in which intending Information professionals must be conversant if they are to operate any type of Information system successfully be it in Archives, Libraries or Documentation Centres. It seems easier to argue that an understanding of our Information Users is one of the Key parameters to the successful operation of most Information systems than to agree whether the

studying of User Information Needs should be a critical component of the curricula for Information Professionals. A number of questions have to be asked: How and Where should this subject feature in the curricular, if at all What should be its weighting versus other courses What should its content be Is there enough content to make a full course.

Questions such as these, and others of a similar nature seem to highlight the fact that there are a number of constraints within which the status of User Information Needs in the curricula has to be determined.

Certainly one such constraint is a historical legacy one - drammatized by the fact that over the years both the practice and education of Information Workers has found it easier to index and classify documents than classify Users. In the context of an Information institution documents are passive and can be acted upon withou reacting, hence the preference of Information services to manage documents rather than users. The volume of literature on various aspects of the handling of documents is tremendous - the sheer force of this volume of literature tends to justify the inclusion of such topics - part of the reasoning being that if so much has been written an the subject then it must be important.

In the context of underdeveloped countries there are yet two other constraints. One is the possible lack of teachers who are knowledgeable and experienced sufficiently to handle this particular course. Quite often the allegation that there isn't

enough content to make up a complete course out of Identification of User Information Needs is, in my view, a betrayal of the shortage of knowledge about the different aspects of this subject. The easy access to relevant text-books and newly published literature to provide a solid back up to lectures, discussions, project assignments, and individual student reading is often a major problem. It is not unusual to find in some schools that the most up to date literature is ten (10) years out of date.

The few constraints mentioned above, which are by no means exhaustive, help to explain the low status of the subject in most of the curricula of Information Professionals in Developing Countries.

The central point of this paper is that the subject 'Identification of User Information Needs' has enough content to make up a course on its own. In practical terms this will depend, partly, on how courses are strauctured in a University. In situations where courses are strauctured in a modular format and each module lasting for one or two semesters, the studying/teaching of User Information Needs should present few problems. If however in dividual courses are strauctured to last for two academic years, or more, then the teaching of User Information Needs as an independent course may not be viable.

I.5 Course Objectives

The objectives of the course need to be carefully worked out because they will determine the specific content, and the time devoted to different sections of the course. The objectives

will also have to reflect the level of knowledge and skills of the students, and the lecturers. Generally, at lower levels of education and training the course objectives should emphasize awareness, general knowledge and practical implementation. At higher levels of education and training, objectives should aim for detailed knolwedge, ability to design and carry out User Needs assessment projects, and the ability to translate these findings to improved delivery of Information services and products. Menou (1979).

The course objectives at the different levels of training could be stated as follow:

Basic level: 1 To enable participants to be aware of the different User groups served by information units.

2. To give participants general knowledge of the major attributes which influence need and use of information.

3. To increase the sensitivity of participants to User Information needs and how these determine services rendered.

Middle Level: I. Provide participants with adequate training to determine the information needs of different User groups.

2. Provide participants with the ability to adopt existing information services and products to suit particular User Needs.

3. Provide the participants with the ability to maintain dialogue with different user groups to monitor their changing needs.

Advanced Level: I. Provide participants with skills for setting up and operating mechanisms for discovering User Information needs.

2. To provide participants with knowledge of various methods and approaches which have been used to identify User Information needs.

3. To provide participants with awareness of the role of User Information needs in determing the setting up and operation of Information systems.

I.5.2 Course Content

The course content described here is pitched at degree and post-graduate level courses but it may be utilized for lower courses with suitable adaptation.

A. Introduction

This part would deal with definitions of information, User needs, wants, demands, and the concept of information value. It would also include the importance of understanding user needs and provide an overview of information needs and national development.

B. Typology of Users

This part would be dealing with distinctions and definitions of different User segments, main characteristics of the major

User groups; Institutions and organizations as information Users.

C. User behaviour in Information seeking and Use

This section would include the concept of information seeking and patterns in User demand for Information. Factors which affect information transfer/exchange within specific communities (ie. Underdeveloped communities). Variables affecting information Use eg., education, culture, wealth, sex, work context, channel, content etc., Barriers to Information transfer and use. Assimilation and Use of information. Invisible colleges, gatekeeping etc. Behavioral patterns to information flow in bureaucracies, issues of political and personal values over access and use of information eg., fear of industries to release some information. Issues of technological information transfer from Developed to Underdeveloped countries.

D. Research Methods.

Methods of Identifying User needs eg., Surveys, interviews, sampling, literature research community profiling etc.,

E. Methods and Approaches to Identification of Information Needs.

This would concentrate on reviewing various methods and approaches which are being used to identify User Information Needs, and their limitations. It would also include case-studies to illustrate such methods.

F. User Satisfaction Evaluation

This part would include the problems of determing User Satisfaction. Methods of evaluating user satisfaction and the implications of User needs to the design and provision of information services, products and programs.

G. Project Work

The project assignment should come at the end of the course. The student should demonstrate ability to study the needs of a particular group of users and come up with concrete possible solutions as to how the users information needs can be met.

I.5.3. Learning Opportunities and Teaching Methods:

The learning methods will to some extent be based on the methods of a particular University especially in determing the distribution between theoretical lectures and practical applications in which theories and principles are tested against practical situations. My feeling is that one can learn the theories and principles of how to identify User information needs but there is no substitute for practical opportunities to be involved in finding out, in the field, the actual information needs of a particular group of Users.

In a situation where the class meets three times a week (1 hour sessions each meeting) the lecturer may spend one and a half sessions to present information on a given topic, for example, patterns of user demand for information by decision-maders, or factors which affect information transfer/exchange

within rural communities in underdeveloped societies etc. These lectures are related to assigned readings. The one and a half sessions which are left in the week could be devoted to students critical reactions and short presentations based on the lecture, reading assignments and observation on the topic and its relevance to d eveloping societies or group of countries eg., Black Africa.

In creating optimum learning conditions, I am convinced that an external practical focus is necessary to remove students from the 'Ivory Tower' atmosphere of an Academic Institution to enable them to get acquainted, objectively, with the status quo of professional practice and thinking, current practice in the relationships between user needs and information services and products. Also to demonstrate to the students the possibilities and limitations of applying the theoretical constructs they have learnt in a real working situation. This last element is absolutely vital for students and teachers in underdeveloped countries because most of the reading assignments will be based on literature originated from industrialised economies, and innevitabily presenting issues of User information needs from a perspective of highly industrialised countries. However, it is my stand that students and teachers in underdeveloped countries have to develop a viewpoint of user information needs from the perspective of agrarian economies.

The external practical focus could also include invitations to

actual users to narrate how they presently satisfy their information needs, and this can be used in conjuction with case studies, and lectures from practitioners in the information sector on a regular basis each year.

I.6: Assessment of Course Effectiveness:

Course evaluation is necessary and important for the purpose of obtaining feedback which may be used for carrying out improvement and modifications in a dynamic teaching/learning situation

Borko (1979) Page, 141.

The current practice in most Universities is to assess learning at the terminal point using formal examinations, and an external examiner system. Any feedback that may be forthcoming can only be useful to students in the next years course. This approach also has a major weakpoint in failing to involve students in assessing the effectiveness of the learning experience they have just undergone. Borko (1979) has given what I consider to be a very useful outline of a questionnaire for students to evaluate a course they are undertaking. The questionnaire elicits judgemental evaluations and suggestions for improvement in three primary areas: (1) Anticipated value of course (2) Lecturers approach and effectiveness (3) The effectiveness of the methods of teaching. My submission is that such an instrument is very useful and should be administered at least twice, some where in the first quarter of the course, and at the end of the course.

There should also be follow-ups to former students and their employers in order to find out how useful/effective was the training/education received in the University.

2: A Quick Guide to the Literature:

The subject of User Information Needs no longer suffer from a shortage of supporting literature. Brenda Dervin and Michael Nolan (1986) indicate the existence of 300 potentially useful citations since 1978. If one is to search for relevant literature beyond 1978 it is likely that more than 1000 journal articles, books and monographs, research reports, and mimeograph articles now exist. Simmons (1985). The problems are hence those of selecting the most relevant literature for a particular area, and for those who underdeveloped countries where shortage of foreign exchange act as a brake on the acquisition of literature, establishing the necessary contacts which will enable acquisition of such literature.

Thomas Wilson (1984) has a number of articles offering definitions of Information, needs, wants and demands and the problems associated with such definitions.

The value of information is the central thesis of Taylors' (1985) article 'Information values in Decision Contexts'. Griffiths (1982) has also discussed the value of information and related delivery services and products. Palmour and others (1980) have produced a useful handbook on the segmentation of users for

a public library system and described various methodologies of finding out user information needs. Pauline Atherton (1977) has produced a handbook which can provide a useful starting point for looking at the relationship between information needs and National development. It includes the information needs of what is termed 'the key sectors' of the economy.

User behaviour in seeking information has been discussed by a number of authors of whom only a few will be metnioned here. Belin (1984) Paisley (1980) Dervin (1980) are all among authors a t the forefront at advocating that in discussing User behaviour, the focus should be on Users rather than on the information systems and what Users may get out of them. Paisley (1968) points out that the user is the central figure within several spheres, all of which influence his information needs.

Brenda Dervin (1984) has produced a monograph which is useful in looking at the information needs of Users, and the variables influencing these needs. The patterns of User behaviour in seeking information is also the subject of a good article by James Kriekelas (1983). Chen and Hernon (1982) have produced a valuable research project report on how to identify and anticipate user information needs from the Users points of view rather than systems point of view.

The topic of organisation information needs and patterns of information flow in bureaucracies Chen and Lagler (1974) have

produced suitable supporting literature. The controversial issues of information needs, political and personal tensions, public access to 'sensitive' information have supporting literature in the Writings of Bozeman (1981), Holgate (1982) and Stafford (1984). Wilson Aiyepeku (1982) articles represent at least one attempt to research information needs of decision-makers in Nigeria, hence affords a starting point to test whether variables to information needs found to be significant in other cultures holds true also in Black Africa. Aboyade (1982) is useful as an exploratory incursion into how semi-illiterate users satisfy their information needs. The illiteracy factor in information seeking is also the subject of a publication based on the Vai tribe of Liberia by Scribner and Cole (1981).

Thomas Allen (1968) is essential for the handling of the concepts of invisible colleges, information gatekeepers and how the information needs of scientists and technologists are satisfied. The topic of different methodologies and approaches to identifying user information needs may be supported by the writings of Dervin and Nolan (1986) case study material of particular user groups is now covered by many Authors, for example, Steig (1981) concentrates on the information needs of historians. User needs as a function of the information transfer process is the subject of an article by Morehead (1982). Information needs and uses of Humanities Scholars is in an article by stone (1982)

Maurice Line and others (1971) have also produced a useful case study of the information needs of social workers.

The evaluation topic can be supported by a number of papers, for example Lancaster (1977), Palmour (1980) and John Blagden (1980) book titled 'Do we really need Libraries Bishop and Lewis (1985) have published a useful report on the evaluation of B.N.B. which may be used to demonstrate how to evaluate an information product.

The topic of Research Methods can be supported adequately by any of the social science research texts. However, Nick Moore (1986) How to do research has proved very useful introduction to research for our students. Library Surveys by Line and Stone (1982) is another valuable text.

3: Summary and Conclusion

This article attempts to justify the inclusion of the subject 'Identification of User Information Needs' as a full course in the curricula for Information Professionals. It is submitted that manpower needs for information professionals is largely determined by both social development requirements and national priorities. 'The curricula for information professionals has the broad aim to equip information personnel with relevant competencies,' it is argued.

It is held that the recognition of the information User as the centre of action in Information Management is a relatively new phenomenon and partly explains the low status of this subject in most curricula for Information Professionals. This neglect, it is argued, is fading away and hence the need for the curricula to reflect this emerging reality. The article argues that not only is the subject important, but there is adequate content to make up a full course.

A course outline for the subject is proposed and abbrief review of some of the most prominent supporting literature is provided.

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